

CETL Briefing Papers: First Year Undergraduate Perceptions of Achievement

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Aims of the Initiative

This initiative considers students' perceptions of First Year Undergraduate Achievement. To date research has not considered achievement in the first year of University study from the students' perspective. Specifically this work considers:

- What does 'Achievement' mean to the First Year undergraduates?
- What is the process that First Year undergraduates' make achievement by?
- How do First Year undergraduates make achievement?
- What are the influential factors that affect the First Year undergraduates' achievement and how they make effect?

Description of the Initiative

Through a case study methodology that comprises of grounded theory and phenomenography studies, this research provides information on First Year undergraduates' perceptions of achievement and the process by which they make achievement. One to one interviews with First Year students were carried out to understand how they make achievement, the methods that they employ to make achievement and the influential factors that affect achievement. This information was analysed through grounded theory to provide a model of achievement making for First Year undergraduates. Students' reflective writing was also accessed and analysed, utilising phenomenography, to provide an understanding of what achievement means to First Year undergraduates.

Evaluation and impact of the Initiative

This is a research programme and does not intend to measure impact. As a consequence, this section overviews the research findings. These are presented in two sections: Findings of the Grounded Theory Study and the Findings of the Phenomenography Study

Findings from the Grounded Theory

Fulfilling one's aims during the first year of higher education has emerged as an overarching category which captures the essence of first year undergraduates' experience of achievement. The achievement experience is about becoming involved in university activities to fulfil their personal aims. Students start university for various reasons and *have different perspectives of* achievement. As a consequence, their aims in the first year are not identical. However, no matter how diversified these personal aims are, undergraduates try to fulfil them by *involving themselves into first year higher education*, which is either eased or complicated by a group of *influential factors*. A series of *first year experience outcomes* result from this dynamic process. They are evaluated by individual student and will be viewed as achievements only if they fulfil his or her aim in first year higher education. Each of the elements of this dynamic process is outlined below.

First Year Undergraduates' Perspective on First Year Achievement in Higher Education: First Year undergraduates' achievements vary in types and levels. Generally FY undergraduates' perceptions, fall into four types of achievement:

- Academic achievement
- Social achievement
- Self improvement
- Settling into Higher Education

Involving Oneself into Higher Education: Involving oneself into HE means undergraduates physically and/or psychologically take part in Higher Education related activities which prepare and enable them to fulfil their aims in their first year of higher education. Involving oneself into HE is a coping strategy. The research shows that FY undergraduates are faced with new study and life routines. Therefore, they need to take part in to know the routines, become accustomed life in HE and get what they want out of it. Rather than a one time event, *Involving oneself into HE* means going through a dynamic process throughout the FY experience in university, which consists of three stages of involvement, Attending, Being Engaged and Dealing with Self-identified Difficulties.

Influential Elements: FY undergraduates need to Involve themselves into HE to fulfil their aims in FY HE. However, according to the interviewees, a number of elements emerge as intervening conditions which either eased or complicated FY undergraduates' involvement into HE related activities. These Influential elements are going.

- *Support* FY undergraduates received various forms of support, which have been identified as critically important to their achievements in FY HE. Support consists of two levels: Structural level and Interpersonal level. Structural level support means support generated from the institution structure. It is embodied by *Course structure, Institution facilities and resources and Academic support services and activities, e.g. Induction.*
- *Academic teaching* influences FY undergraduates' involvement into HE. This has been presented from two perspectives, the impact of *effective teaching* and the impact of *ineffective teaching.*
- *Interpersonal relationship* is influential and impacts on all the three levels of Involvement, *Attending, Being engaging* and *Dealing with self identified difficulties.* The influence of *Interpersonal relationship* is twofold, *Positive Relations* and *Negative Relations*
- *Accommodation* is highly influential. This has been differentiated into *Staying at home* and *Living away from home.* *Staying at home* means spending time in travelling and being geographically far from staff and fellow students. This has a negative impact on the FY undergraduates' social involvement and achievement because students who are *staying at home* tend to go home right after academic sessions. They are held back from *Attending* social activities in University either because of time concern or due to their close bond with family members which reduces their motivation to socialize with others.
- *Personal academic background* does not limit itself to students' knowledge level of a chosen subject. It also extends to the teaching and learning style FY undergraduates have been used to before starting HE. This lead to differences in the level of challenge on FY undergraduates. Some FY undergraduates come to university with a sound knowledge of the subject area; while others enter HE as mature students who may not have done much in the chosen subject before Compared to the latter, the former group

are more likely to feel that FY HE is easy to cope, especially during the first semester.

- *Personal value system:* During the achievement making process, FY undergraduates, either consciously or unconsciously, assign values to what happens around them. Actions are only taken when when students believe occurrences to be *intrinsically* or *extrinsically valuable*. Involvement is believed to be *intrinsically valuable* when the students enjoy the activities they attend. They express their willingness for *Attending* or feeling of being *engaged* due to genuine interest or enthusiasm.
- *Personal routines* means the usual or normal ways individual students behave or do things. The level of involvement and employment of certain coping strategies are greatly influenced by students' *Personal routines*, which is formulated by their individual character and previous life experience.

FY experience outcomes involving oneself into HE is not a one-time event for FY undergraduates. It occurs over and over again throughout FY study. Consequently a series of outcomes result. These are evaluated by individual within the framework of his or her perspectives on FY HE achievements. These outcomes could fall along a continuum in FY undergraduates' perception, which goes from the end of *Underachievement* to the end of *Achievement*.

Findings of the Phenomenography

FY undergraduate experience HE in four ways:

HE is experienced as a new place: HE is 'a new place' for FY undergraduates. It is roughly symbolized as an educational organisation and HE experience is more than often referred to as *University life*. Students' focus of attention is the new environment, such as institution facilities and atmosphere created by staff and fellow students, and new routines generated by HE. It is only in this category that HE experience is explicitly related to particular institution.

HE is experienced as Coping with Assessment: HE is identified by FY undergraduates as a type of assessment, which can be used to evaluate their academic capability or decide whether they are qualified to enter a particular career. The focus of student's attention is their performance in course tasks and assessment. The structural aspects of this conception relate to attendance, assignments or exams, module deadlines and grades.

HE is experienced as a process of learning subject knowledge and professional skills: FY undergraduates experience HE in terms of furthering subject knowledge and professional skills. Their focus of attention is details of various module contents and study skills being developed within the framework of course structure, for instance, IT skills, Numerical skills and self reflection in terms of facilitating being a learner in HE. In this category, HE may also be regarded as a means to prepare for future career. However, HE is conceived more as learning subject knowledge and professional skills, namely professional training in this category rather than simply acquiring a qualification. This also draws a boundary between this category and the category of experiencing HE as Coping with Assessment.

HE is experienced as Individual Maturing Process: HE is experienced as a stage of life when adulthood starts. HE facilitates maturing as an individual. The students' focus of attention in this category is their SELF as a person, in other words, their personality development and capability enhancement as an adult. When HE is

experienced as individual maturing process, the referential aspects of the previous three categories are combined and consequently their structural aspects are focused simultaneously in this category. For example, settling into HE may be regarded as individual adaptability exercise and subject knowledge and qualification are taken as the basis for complete independence in adulthood.

HE is experienced as Broadening One's Horizon: HE is a function in expanding ones ideas, knowledge and experience. As a consequent, students' focus of attention goes beyond the institution, course of study, subject knowledge and individual self and extends to a much wider context, social and life context. Perceiving self as part of the wider context, students take HE as an opportunity to broaden horizon and gain an understanding of the real world and life at a general level. The students' focus of attention in this category covers a variety of experience in HE and its cultivating effect in formulating a holistic view of the world outside as well as meaning of life.

Structural relationships between the categories: There is an inclusive hierarchical relationship inherent in the five categories of description. This relationship can be illustrated by demonstrating the variations in structural aspects of the five categories along the following three logically interrelated themes of expanding awareness:

- Focus of attention in HE experience
- HE learning activities
- HE outcome and achievement

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